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# The Journey to Warm Demander Teaching

# 3

## The Author Reflects



At the end of a professional development session, a teacher stated to the group and me,

As a white male teacher, even more especially for the Black men in my classroom, . . . I strove to build a classroom that felt inclusive, that felt supportive, a place where my students would want to be—and in doing so, I think that I stopped demanding things from them.

More than that, I think that I don't know how to do both: I ask them to do things, or sometimes I straight out tell them to do things . . . but to demand, for me, has seemed at odds with my desire to be a warm teacher. How do I demand things of my students, how do I push them and not go easy on them, but also show them that I care about them and that I'm here for them?

I feel comfortable that I am a warm teacher—a positive presence for my students, someone who wants to make them feel welcome—but not a demanding one.

My work with his school on Radical Self-Care, which improved the teachers' and leaders' health and resulted in a significant development

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of trust, led us to discussions about the impact of systemic oppression on their students and the ways it was demonstrated in their “alternative pathway” high school. Their students began receiving the message that they did not “fit” at school starting at four years old. They were not on grade level by third grade and often, eventually, disciplined out of traditional schools. They experienced racial trauma (Bryant-Davis, 2007; Menakem, 2017) and personal trauma. The students were at an alternative pathway high school with a Warm Demander School Leader. I was there challenging the teachers to think about how they could interrupt years of systemic oppression in their schools to help their BIPOC students graduate and plan for a future beyond graduation. This teacher’s inquiry initiated the extended Warm Demander Teacher anti-bias training.

The opening quote from the white male teacher reflects a common challenge of implementing Warm Demander pedagogy (Ware, 2006). Many teachers, particularly those who are white (the majority of our nation’s teaching force), don’t have a cultural connection with their BIPOC students. Further, the absence of such cultural connections perpetuates implicit biases, which create a barrier to forming the foundational relationships of Warm Demander teaching. While BIPOC teachers tend to have a better grasp of the culturally nuanced behavior and beliefs of their BIPOC students, the premise of this chapter (and the book) is that, with sustained effort, **all** teachers have the capacity to identify and interrupt their biases, use their power in ways that affirm and support the identities of their students, recognize the policies and practices that oppress those students, and grow into Warm Demander Teachers.

For different reasons, BIPOC teachers may experience challenges in developing relationships with our students. The fluidity of culture, for one thing, can reduce similarity of experiences between the teacher and students. For another, the students can be influenced by prior experiences with educators who were not Warm Demander Teachers. Therefore, students’ healthy response of waiting to develop the trust that supports a suitable classroom culture may require teachers to continue working and be patient.

Despite having had exposure to the vast body of literature on culturally responsive teaching (Delpit, 1995; Irvine, 1990, 2003; Irvine & Armento, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1994), many teachers struggle to authentically become culturally responsive educators for our students. This chapter explores cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998) as a framework for teachers to continue working to remove the cultural/racial identity barriers that impede our students' academic, socioemotional success, and leadership development.

### Breathe



Before you read the next section, pause here, and take a deep breath. Really—pause your reading. First, inhale through your nose. Count 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Hold your breath. Now, exhale through your mouth to a count of 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8. Settle into your seat. (Hopefully, you are sitting comfortably.) Check in with your body. Do you feel tension in parts of your body right now? Make sure to take a moment to address any tension you feel. As the discussion on the issues of power, racism, and bias begins and you feel your body tense up, notice the awareness that this is an area of work. Take a moment to relax your face, your jaw, your shoulders, and to breathe. You'll be asked to pause and to check in with your body frequently throughout this chapter and to notice your somatic responses to the topics in the chapter (Menakem, 2017). This is a part of the inner work you will need to ground yourself and become open to the uncomfortable yet beneficial discussions that will take place throughout your Warm Demander Teacher transformation.

**Graphic source:** [istock.com/Skarin](https://www.istock.com/Skarin)

BIPOC teachers, having processed many of these somatic responses in their life, can become an ally or trusted adult for students giving them a needed respite from the emotional challenges experienced with teachers with whom they do not feel safe.

Readers are familiar with the following statistics if they have been engaged in educational and racial equity work. The numbers and percentages of white teachers occur in greater frequency than BIPOC teachers, and the number of white teachers is disproportionate to the percentages of BIPOC children in our schools.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2023) reports the following demographic percentages of public school teachers during the 2020–21 school year:

- 80% White
- 9% Hispanic
- 6% Black
- 2% Asian
- 2% Two or more races
- Less than 1% American Indian/Alaska Native
- Less than .5% Pacific Islander

However, during the same year, the percentages of K–12 students were as follows:

- 45% White
- 28% Hispanic
- 15% Black
- 5.5% Asian
- 5% Two or more races
- 0.9% American Indian/Alaska Native



## Reflection

- Is it important for our students to have teachers who share their cultural/racial identity?
- What are the challenges for BIPOC teachers to develop productive relationships with students who share their cultural/racial identity?
- How can schools support students when they have teachers who do not share their cultural/racial identity?
- For teachers who do not share their students' cultural/racial identity, what can be done to improve the experiences of our students in school?

## Cultural Humility

Analyzing and dismantling cultural bias for teachers is a continuous and intentional process. Research and anecdotal data from educators frequently note how teachers' biases create a barrier that prevents them from developing authentic relationships with students. All humans possess biases that can be disrupted with sustained effort. The presence of teacher biases often carries harmful consequences. For our students, such biases undercut their positive experiences with school and learning and work against attaining academic achievement. Moreover, the divisiveness of our current political climate discourages authentic self-reflection by teachers regarding biases about students who do not share the teacher's cultural and racial identities and in discussing the impact of race on academic achievement and ways to disrupt systems of oppression in schools. Teachers committed to their authentic growth ask, "What do I do now?" In fact, authentically asking that question is necessary inner work. You'll be on the best path forward to becoming a Warm Demander Teacher if you can sit with the discomfort that accompanies the awareness that you have biases, be they racial, gender, class, ability, or those that limit your skills in forming a community with people whose lives are different from yours.

Ultimately, it is on you to do the work to interrupt and disrupt your demonstration of biases. This work requires that you *willingly* engage in conversations, written reflections, and identifying behaviors that require change and then work to change to harmful behaviors. While engaging in this work, stopping to be aware of controlling your breathing, calming your mind, acknowledging discomfort, and continuing is required.

The classic work of Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998) on cultural humility is significant for this process, providing a more accessible framework for addressing the difficult topic of implicit bias in a challenging political climate. Since the introduction of cultural humility, the medical profession has continued to study the work, and the continued research is applicable in schools with teachers (Davis & Hook, 2019; Foronda, 2020; Gallardo, 2014; Moon & Sandage, 2019).

Davis and Hook (2019) noted that "cultural humility scholarship accelerated during heated political and religious polarization,"

making this theory applicable to contemporary conditions of schools. As they describe lifelong learners, they specify committing to a process of engaging with communities and perspectives that present a cultural perspective that is different than one's own. Humility, in this context, is demonstrated by one's willingness and desire to learn about different communities, free from judgment. Such an openness to learning enhances the relationships with the members of the communities.

The term *lifelong learners* is often overused in interviews, graduate school applications, or teachers' descriptions of themselves. In the context of cultural humility, lifelong learning describes a teacher's commitment to humbly engage with students while admitting they do not know about the students' lives and culture. Such teachers acknowledge that they don't know what they don't know (Singleton, 2015) about their students and position the students and families as the experts on their own cultural/racial identities. Teachers are encouraged to continually reflect on their beliefs about students and, most importantly, examine how their cultural and racial perspective has an impact on their teaching practice and, ultimately, on their students. The goal is to move to a deeper level of the intersection of identities and to gain awareness and appreciation through learning from students and community. Cultural humility fosters examining and interruption of biases (Farrelly et al., 2022).

Working to attain cultural humility is a growth opportunity for educators who desire to create engaging and effective relationships with students (Gallardo, 2014; Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). More authentic than cultural awareness, sensitivity, and competency, the theory of cultural humility is grounded in health care research. Comparably to health care, education also has the potential to create transformative and lifesaving experiences with our students. Classrooms can be places of healing (and harm), and I suggest that teachers who authentically engage in cultural humility as presented by Tervalon and Murray-Garcia will also experience transformation. Thus, the logical application of cultural humility to teaching precisely articulates the role of teachers to become Warm Demander Teachers. The following quote synthesizes Tervalon and Murray-Garcia's approach to cultural humility and its application to Warm Demander teaching:

It is a process that requires humility as individuals continually engage in self-reflection and self-critique as lifelong learners and effective practitioners. It is a process that requires humility in how physicians [**teachers**] bring into check the power imbalances that exist in the dynamics of physician-patient [**white teacher privilege**] communication by using patient [**student**] focus interviewing [**interacting**] and care. It is a process that requires humility to develop and maintain mutually respectful and dynamic partnerships with communities [**students and families**]. (1998, p. 118; bold phrases added for emphasis and comparison)

Cultural humility addresses the power imbalance between white teachers and our students (Foronda, 2020). By using this framework, teachers begin to develop the humility that prepares them to examine the oppression of racially marginalized students and see their role in interrupting oppression. Further cultural humility is an overlooked precursor to becoming a culturally responsive teacher. BIPOC teachers may have similar lived experiences that can minimize the need for cultural humility. Yet there may be aspects of the student's lives that encourage BIPOC teachers to use cultural humility to gain more insight and compassion to enhance your relationships.

As Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998) identified in their research, cultural humility provides the opportunity for [physicians in their study or] teachers to humbly reject the inclination to self-proclaim their cultural expertise or cultural competency to understand that they are *always* learning from students and *always* examining their power dynamic and privilege with students and families. Cultural humility is the driving force to *always* encourage teachers to engage authentically with students; to unpack and develop an awareness of the humanity, brilliance, beauty, and resiliency of the culture of our students; to examine how our students see authority and leadership; and to understand how our students recognize care. With that said, engaging in conversations about power dynamics in schools and how one's own power can reinforce racial trauma takes a large degree of courage. The more educators avoid such uncomfortable topics, the less capacity they have to disrupt their biases and develop the skills to engage in Warm Demander pedagogy.



## Reflective Practice Activity for Cultural Humility



Later in this chapter, you will engage in an in-depth activity to initiate the journey of recognizing your cultural/racial identity. Similar to the research of Farrelly et al. (2022), this activity and the Cultural/Racial Identity Journey engages us

in the exploration of sociocultural issues through anti-bias and anti-racist work, [and] we empower the voices of . . . students from diverse backgrounds and experiences. In doing so, we aim to scaffold a transformative learning process in which . . . educators begin to develop their cultural humility and understand their role in engaging in social justice advocacy for . . . students. (p. 186)

To help you prepare to develop your Warm Demander Teacher beliefs, let's start with an activity that encourages you to reflect on engaging in cultural humility.

The school community where I teach can best be described as . . .	
What are the strengths of the community?	
The students who do not experience caring from teachers nor engage in high achievement that attend the school where I teach can best be described as having . . .	
What are examples of their strength and resiliency?	
How did I learn this information about the community and students?	
Did I talk with community members and students, or was I told this information?	
What can I do to learn more about the community's strengths and my students' talents?	

Complete the chart when you have time to reflect and think about the questions beyond superficial responses. Upon completion, put the responses away. Notice if you learn new ideas that change your responses. Do you seek out new answers by talking with other teachers, students, or community members? Return to the questions in a few days and think, "Are my beliefs consistent with cultural humility?"